

First General Meeting of the Informal Study Group
on Exchange of Development Information

Report

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Executive Summary

1. The participants in this First General Meeting of the Informal Study Group on Exchange of Development Information¹, representing intergovernmental organisations, bilateral donors, non-governmental organisations and research institutes², discussed approaches and instruments aimed at **improving the exchange of information on development activities**³. The meeting was held against a background of continuing pressure on the level of financial resources available for development activities. It was generally acknowledged that **improved co-operation** between development aid donors is urgently needed to **prevent duplication** of donor efforts and the wastage of available resources.
2. The participants in the meeting recognised that facilitating the exchange of information could lead to an improvement of the ability of donors to execute development activities more effectively.
3. The participants supported the introduction of a **Common Exchange Format for Development Activity Information (CEFDA)**⁴.

¹ This first General Meeting, hosted by the OECD Development Centre at the Académie Diplomatique Internationale, was preceded by three meetings of a preparatory Study Group on the Exchange of Development Information, held in Paris at the OECD Development Centre on 6th-7th June 1989, 15th-16th February 1990, and 2nd-3rd October 1990. All four meetings were chaired by Mr. Maury D. Brown from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Reports from the preceding meetings are available from the Rapporteur: Mr. Terry Gavin, International Development Research Centre (IDRC), P.O. Box 8500, Ottawa, Canada K1G 3HG, Fax: (1-613)-238-7230. Rapporteur for the First General Meeting was Mr. Henny Helmich, External Co-operation of the OECD Development Centre, 94, rue Chardon Lagache, 75016 Paris, France. Fax: (33-1)-4524-7943.

² For a full list of participants and organisations see Annex A to the main report.

³ The agenda of the meeting is attached as Annex B to the main report.

⁴ The definition of development activities used in this report is "...those activities of a development co-operation character that seek to mobilize or increase the potential and capacities of countries to promote economic and social development and welfare, including the transfer of resources to developing countries or regions in a tangible or intangible form." United Nations, General Assembly. Resolution 35/81 of 5 December, 1980.

4. The proposed **CEFDA** considered by the meeting consists of a common record structure, in the form of a minimum list of data fields required to identify and describe a development activity, and guidelines as to the content of each field (the field description)⁵. The format is designed for retrieval of information (descriptive data elements, e.g. by subject, geographical area, and organisation). It is not designed for the management of financial flows, comparative analysis or the keeping of statistics.
5. The **CEFDA** facilitates the sharing of development activity information between organisations. The expected **benefits** through this information sharing are:
 - A. **The cost of information exchange activities for each agency could be decreased.** Presently, when agencies share information, the cost of data collection, interpretation (both linguistic and intellectual) and verification is very high. This high cost is compounded because different standards and concepts exist not only between countries but also within each organisation. Different interpretation of exchanged data generally leads to inconsistencies, impeding the effective use of information from other users in or outside an agency.
 - B. **Management information systems could be improved.** Each agency could use the CEFDA to introduce its own activity information systems, or to improve the co-ordination of various existing databases within its organisation. Agencies which are just embarking on the establishment of information systems could use the CEFDA as a useful format for the basis of their systems.
 - C. **Agencies could strengthen their learning and planning capabilities.** Because of the improvement of the availability of information on past, current and planned development activities, experiences of agencies might be exchanged more easily. This would also be beneficial to each agency's planning capacity, while reviewing the "lessons learned" with past and on-going activities.

⁵ Di Lauro, Anne., Consultant, Proposed Common Exchange Format for Development Activity Information, Study prepared for the First General Meeting of the Informal Study Group on Exchange of Development Information, Paris 19th-21st June 1991 (Annex C to the main report). The CEFDA as presented by Di Lauro will be modified following comments of the participants at the meeting.

- D. **Duplication between agencies could be avoided.** Through the availability and accessibility of information on past, on-going and future activities, agencies might avoid duplication of initiatives and activities.
 - E. **Costs of evaluation of activities could be reduced, and evaluations could become more effective.** Agencies might compare development experience from within their own organisations with evaluation programmes of other organisations. Through the collective experience of various development actors, similar evaluation programmes would be based on a much broader practice.
 - F. **Time/cost for planning-missions could be reduced.** Through the availability of current development activity information, development organisations could considerably reduce the time and cost of feasibility missions. By avoiding duplication of planning missions, agencies could use scarce resources for these tasks to undertake activities in other areas.
 - G. **Agencies could identify more opportunities for co-funded programmes.** Agencies could quickly learn of other development activities in similar areas. Thus, co-funding partners could be found and duplication could be avoided.
 - H. **Agencies could improve their accountability.** Through the available data, agencies might be able to make their record of achievement much more visible towards taxpayers, contributors, and their constituencies.
6. The participants further called for a compilation of a **Directory of Existing Development Activity Databases**. This Database Directory will contain descriptions of those existing databases in development agencies ready to participate in information exchange using the CEFDA. These descriptions would contain technical information on: the type of data available from those databases (activities information, research in progress, statistical data, evaluation reports, etc.), the format for data storage used, address, information about the 'contact point' in the agency, and the terms on which the agency is prepared to share information from this database.
7. The participants at the meeting studied various approaches to the strengthening of information exchange. With the availability of a CEFDA and a Directory of Existing Databases, the basic instruments would be in place to exchange information between agencies. These exchanges would

establish a 'network' of relations which would be improved over a period of time with increasing experience in co-operation. Through this improved exchange, the participants expected that the existing databases would be strengthened and would include more relevant and up-to-date information.

8. Finally, the participants discussed the feasibility of creating a **Central Development Project Database**, with the CEFDA data elements, in place of this network of bilateral exchange relations. The basic argument for discussing such an undertaking is that a central database would **replace the manifold bilateral relationships** (in which an information-providing agency would have to supply information repeatedly) with a one-to-one relationship of information providing agencies with the database management unit. This central database would make all information available to all collaborating agencies periodically on **Compact Disc-Read Only Memory (CD-ROM)**. With this approach, the establishment of a Central Database would provide **important economies of scale**.
9. The DAC Secretariat and UN-ACCIS representatives offered to provide their development activity databases in the common exchange format for inclusion in the central database, once conversion and reformatting issues into the CEFDA have been resolved. The DAC's Credit Reporting System (CRS) and the UN-ACCIS Registry of Development Activity Databases would provide access to most on-going bilateral donor and UN multilateral development activities.
10. The participants supported **the creation of a prototype CD-ROM** which would contain collections of development activity information, such as the DAC-CRS and UN-ACCIS Registry databases, in the CEFDA format from participating organisations.
11. The participants at the meeting unanimously agreed to set up a **Co-ordinating Unit** with the following **main⁶** tasks:
 - A. The elaboration of a final proposal for a CEFDA.
 - B. The collection of information using the CEFDA from all participating agencies and the transcription into a format for CD-ROM distribution.
 - C. The creation of a Directory of Development Activity Databases, and the maintenance of the Register of Information Providing Agencies.

⁶ A full-descriptive list of tasks of the Co-ordinating Unit is provided in the main report.

- D. A quarterly newsletter to network participants.
- E. The investigation of the feasibility of establishing a more comprehensive Central Database with expanded data elements beyond the CEFDA definition.
12. A proposal that the **International Development Research Centre (IDRC)** in Canada would host the Co-ordinating Unit for an initial period of **18 months** was unanimously welcomed by the participants.
13. **IDRC agreed to host the Co-ordinating Unit** for an **interim period** of two months and offered to extend that period to 18 months, provided that sufficient revenue commitments were obtained from the meeting's participants during the interim period⁷. The participants agreed to meet again, after the 18 months initial period, to review the progress which had been made.
14. IDRC estimated that **US\$ 250,000** in revenue commitments would be necessary to perform the co-ordinating unit tasks **for an 18 month period**.
15. A number of **revenue-generating mechanisms**, such as subscriptions or memberships, were explored as a means to support the Co-ordinating Unit functions.
16. The Steering Group of the Informal Study Group determined that **organisational commitments** in the form of US\$ 5,000 or US\$ 10,000 memberships subscriptions⁸ would be required to fully fund the co-ordinating unit for the next 18 months.
17. The **result** of the First General Meeting is the establishment of a mechanism of donor co-operation, which represents more than simply an information-sharing agreement. The mechanism established is a **major step forward in the support of significant donor co-ordination**. It will contribute to improved efficiency in the use of resources, the quality of design of development activities and increased accountability of development co-operation. The General Meeting has succeeded in bringing together a group of committed persons interested in sharing information on development activities. This group is the guarantee that this major step forward in donor co-ordination will provide tangible results.

⁷ A budget and a timetable is annexed to the main report as Annex G.

⁸ Subscription levels would be dependent on full or partial services required by each organisation from the Co-ordinating Unit.